Fire Destroys 1846-Built Fenley Home

Photo by Louis J. Moseson

Flames and smoke curled from the porch roof as firemen exited through the charred front of the 112-year-old Fenley farm home during a fire that destroyed the landmark last night. Located off Frankfort Avenue, near the Masonic Widows and Orphans Home, it had been vacant since Miss Frances and the late Miss Annette Fenley entered nursing homes last year. (Story on Page 9.)

Fire Ruins Old Fenley Mansion

Ten years ago Miss Frances Fenley said of her 1846-built mansion where she and her late sister, Miss Annette Fenley, lived:

"I hope this house and all the antique furniture in it burn down before outsiders live in it."

It did.

Last night, fire, apparently started by vandals, consumed the 112-year-old home on Fenley Avenue just west of the Masonic Widows and Orphans home, 3701 Frankfort Avenue.

The flames rose 50 feet, according to Fire Captain Leslie Russell, who said the entire structure was aflame by the time firemen arrived. About 1,000 spectators gathered at the isolated home, which stood on a 60-acre tract.

Vacant for a Year

The historic residence had been vacant since early last year when the Fenley sisters went to live in nursing homes. Miss Annette died July 3, 1957. Miss Frances, 85, now is at Pewee Valley Sanitarium.

They lived in the family home alone for many years. Determined to preserve a long-gone way of life, they never had electricity, modern plumbing, or central heating installed.

They fought bitterly against annexation by Louisville, but the City overtook them in 1948. It was at that time that Miss Frances made what turned out to be the prophetic statement on the fire.

The residence was built by the sisters' grandfather, William Cadwalder Williams, on the eastern edge of a 1,000-acre tract he owned. It had brick walls 18 inches thick. It once had a staff of 16 servants.

Had 13-Foot Ceilings

Rooms in the 50-by-40-foot house had 13-foot ceilings. The 12-foot-wide front hall had a rare circular "flying" staircase with no visible means of support.

Undamaged by the fire were a carriage house, an ice house, a two-story slave quarters, and a half-dozen other buildings on the property.

William Logan Fenley, 4836 Westport Road, Miss Frances' nephew, said vandals had repeatedly broken into the home since it was closed. He said the land and buildings were appraised at $80,000 last year and the buildings were insured for a nominal amount.

The Fire Department listed the fire as of undetermined origin.

His aunt has not been told of the fire, Fenley said.